

Social Research Call

*Who benefits and who bears the costs?
Social equity outcomes of marine
protected areas in Portugal*



Acronym: EQUIMAR

Project leader: João Garcia Rodrigues

Host organisation: CIIMAR – Centro Interdisciplinar de Investigação Marinha e Ambiental

Main purpose of the project: EQUIMAR provides a quantitative assessment of how marine protected areas (MPAs) affect small-scale fishers in Portugal. It asks who bears the costs of protection, who shares the benefits, who has a voice in decisions, and whose practices are recognised in policy.

Design/methodology/approach: EQUIMAR captures social equity's dimensions through three complementary quantitative approaches: quasi-experimental analysis of fisheries administrative data (distributive equity), structured content analysis of governance documents (procedural and recognition equity), and a survey of fishers (perceived equity).

Potential results: EQUIMAR will produce the first national-scale evidence base on how MPAs affect livelihoods, economic outcomes, and governance experiences of small-scale fishing communities. It will synthesise these findings into a typology of MPAs based on their social equity performance, and deliver an interactive equity map letting policymakers, communities, and the public explore each MPA's equity profile.

Social relevance of the research: The European Union has committed to protecting 30% of its seas by 2030, an ecologically necessary and widely supported goal. But environmental policies can carry hidden social costs, falling hardest on already marginalised communities. Marine conservation is no exception: expanding MPAs can restrict access to waters coastal communities depend on. EQUIMAR will provide the evidence to ensure that ocean protection is not only effective, but fair.

Originality/value of the project: EQUIMAR reframes MPAs from conservation tools judged on ecological performance, to policy instruments with social consequences. Its innovation is methodological: it brings rigorous causal methods from policy evaluation to test the common "win-win" claim about MPAs. This shifts attention to how MPA design shapes who benefits, who decides, and whose knowledge is recognised.